

Parashat Va'etchanan 5783, 2023:

The Rambam: How to Love Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The phrase, “And you shall love Hashem your G-d” appears twice in the Torah; the first instance is in our *parasha* (*Sefer Devarim* 6:5), and the second is found in Parashat Eikev (11:1). Our Torah portion’s verse famously states: “And you shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means.” (This and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Acknowledging Hashem’s immanence in the world forms the foundation for being able to love Him. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), suggests the following approach to recognizing His presence:

When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [G-d’s] great name, as David stated: “My soul thirsts for Hashem, for the living G-d.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 42:3, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* II:2, these and all *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

In the Rambam’s view, awareness of Hashem stems from a thoroughgoing appreciation of the beauty of the natural world and its infinite complexity. This, in turn, leads to a burning desire to “immediately love, praise, and glorify Him,” and to “know His great name.” Thus far, the Rambam is emphasizing man’s intellectual relationship with the Almighty. As such, he employs the terms “contemplates” (“*she’yitbonane*”) and “to know” (“*lei’da*”).

Yet, how does one transition from a purely intellectual gesture of love for the Almighty to its practical application? The Rambam addresses this question in his *Hilchot Teshuvah*:

One who serves [G-d] out of love occupies himself in the Torah and the *mitzvot* and walks in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive: not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, he does what is true because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it...G-d commanded us [to seek] this rung [of service] as conveyed by Moshe: “And you shall love Hashem your G-d.” When a man will love G-d in the proper manner, he will immediately perform all of the *mitzvot* motivated by love. (X:2)

Clearly, for the Rambam, love of G-d is expressed in a two-fold fashion: the diligent study of Torah coupled with the fulfillment of the *mitzvot*—in a manner wherein “he does what is true because it is true.” The Rambam expands upon this idea by asking, “What is the nature of the proper love [of G-d]?” His answer informs Jewish thought until the present moment:

That a person should love G-d with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of G-d. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person’s] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for G-d should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded “And you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means.” (*Hilchot Teshuvah* X:3)

In the Maimonidean world view, therefore, the love of Hashem is one of powerful passion and obsessive desire, as is metaphorically reflected in King Solomon’s *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs) wherein he states, “Sustain me with flasks of wine, and spread my bed with apples, for I am lovesick.” (2:5) How does one develop such a holistic and deep love for the Creator? Once again, let us turn to the Rambam: “It is a well-known and clear matter that the love of G-d will not become attached within a person’s heart until he becomes obsessed with it at all times as is fitting...” (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 10:6) Obsession (*shugah*

bah) with the Almighty, therefore, is the key element that enables a person to pursue his love of Him. Little wonder, then, that the Rambam likens the feeling of overwhelming love for one's beloved to the love one has for the Master of the Universe.

At this juncture, the Rambam returns to the connection between man's knowledge and love of the Almighty:

One can only love G-d [as an outgrowth] of the knowledge with which he knows Him. The nature of one's love depends on the nature of one's knowledge. A small [amount of knowledge arouses] a lesser love. A greater amount of knowledge arouses a greater love... (*Hilchot Teshuvah* X:6)

On measure, the Rambam is teaching us a crucial lesson regarding the relationship that obtains between G-d and man, namely, that this bond, as in all human relationships, takes ongoing work and effort, and must not be taken for granted. Knowledge of Hashem arouses our love for Him; our engagement in serious Torah study, prayer, and *mitzvot* observance will enable us to know His ways. As *Shlomo HaMelech* taught us so long ago: “Know Him in all your ways, and He will direct your paths.” (*Sefer Mishle* III:6) With Hashem's help, may this be so, and may our knowledge of Him enable us to fulfill the *pasuk*, “And you shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means.” *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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